Opinion
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A sign indicating that the U.S. Capitol is closed for tours

A sign indicating that the U.S. Capitol is closed for tours is seen Oct. 20, 2025, weeks into the continuing U.S. government shutdown in Washington. (OSV News/Reuters/Al Drago)



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When visiting Warsaw, you enter a church or museum, and in the vestibule, there is usually a photograph of what the site looked like on Jan. 17, 1945, when the Nazis finally capitulated or fled, and the Red Army rolled in. Mostly, the photographs show nothing but rubble. The same is true of cities throughout central Europe: Photographs of devastation are everywhere.

Looking back at the political life of our nation in 2025, those images come to mind. Much of American democracy seems to be in ruins. There is a difference however: The devastation here was not caused by foreign bombs; it was self-inflicted.

The Department of Justice, so powerfully and meaningfully reformed after the depredations of Watergate, has been turned into a dangerous tool in the president's vendetta arsenal. The Department of Defense renamed itself the Department of War

and promptly branched out into extrajudicial killings on the high seas. Congressional oversight has been MIA all year as Republican Party leaders, who once were sticklers for things like constitutional form, have become a cast of extras in Donald Trump's drama.

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This time last year, it wasn't clear how Trump would govern. Would his second term be better than the first? Worse? "As 2024 comes to an end, there is so much we do not know. But we do know this: Our politics reflects some deep divisions within our society, and the only answer that politics achieved in 2024 was a weak and dangerous one," I wrote as 2024 came to a close. "The American people bet that Trump will fix things. But will they like Trump's fixes?"

Trump was not even back in the White House for a month when it became clear that his second term would be far worse than his first. Shortly after the inauguration, the administration announced it was suspending foreign aid and essentially shuttering the U.S. Agency for International Development. Catholic Relief Services started to lay off workers because the government funding dried up. Around the globe, the cutoff of aid imperiled the lives of millions of poor people. And, for what? Foreign aid was always a miniscule share of the federal budget.

The president wasn't letting any grass grow under his feet when he got back to D.C. A flurry of executive orders on all sorts of issues extended the reach of the executive branch and politicized parts of the government that had been shielded from political interference since the Pendleton Act was passed into law and signed by President Chester Arthur in 1883.

Most disturbing of all was the transformation of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency, or ICE. It is one of the hallmarks of a free society — as opposed to a totalitarian one — that law enforcement agents are easily identifiable. The images of masked agents, with no identifying markings or uniforms, marauding the streets of our cities are chilling. This is not how it is done in America, but this is

America and it is being done.

Officers from the Illinois State Police and the Broadview Police Department detain demonstrat

Officers from the Illinois State Police and the Broadview Police Department detain demonstrators during a protest against immigration actions outside the Broadview ICE facility in suburban Chicago Nov. 7. (OSV News/Reuters/Carlos Barria)

There are three impediments to Trump's attempts at dismantling democratic norms.

First, there are the courts. It is profoundly unfortunate that Trump has a conservative majority on the Supreme Court, five men and one woman, and they have long believed in the doctrine of the unitary executive. I think they are wrong, but they are not "caving" to Trump by adhering to a legal theory they have held for decades. Call me foolish, but I don't think the court will ratify anything patently unconstitutional the president might attempt. Their ruling in the tariff case will be instructive because the law is so clearly against the president.

Second, there are the generals. Our military dreads becoming embroiled in domestic politics. Generals and admirals are schooled in the Constitution and they have studied countries that have slipped into autocracy. There is a vigorous esprit de corps among them. When Trump went to the Pentagon and harangued them about needing to agree with him, their silence spoke volumes. If the president tried to use them to affect a putsch, they would not do it.

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Third, there is us, the people. Of the three barriers to tyranny at this moment, this appears the weakest. Many people who voted for Trump because they thought the Democrats were out of touch on the economy may now be registering negative assessments of the president but they didn't register that disapproval when he crippled USAID or unleashed ICE. Only when he, too, denied there is an affordability crisis did they abandon the Trump ship. The protests against his assault on immigrants have been episodic. It is shocking how little outrage there has been at the very idea of masking federal agents. If the economy improves, look for many of those swing voters to swing back to the GOP.

The Democrats are basking in their solid victories in November's off-year elections. But the Democrats seem unwilling to confront the reasons they lost to Trump, and until they shed, clearly and publicly, some of their cultural extremism, it is hard to see how they win national elections or pick off Senate seats in much of middle America. You can't win nationally with a coalition centered exclusively around major urban areas along the coasts. Sadly, I do not see much of an appetite for self-examination among the Democrats.

The Preamble to the U.S. Constitution states that the people created a government "in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity." In 2025, injustice was on the rise, domestic tranquility vanished, care of the common defense and the general welfare has been handed over to incompetents like Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth or ideologues like Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr. The blessings of liberty have not been so threatened since the Civil War. That "more perfect Union" seems further and further away.

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